

Richard Bruner's Musical Philosophy:

[Capital-M] Music

Part I: Living Music, Doing Music - A Sketch

Revised February 22, 2024

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Introduction

Music is a much wider world than most people are directly aware of. I believe that people should try to explore more of it than many people do these days. This is a system to keep people learning and intellectually curious about the world of music, and to help people become well-rounded musicians who are competent in a variety of musical situations. This is also something of a way of life, not just a set of skills to learn and apply to a career, and can apply equally to professional and amateur musicians. While I will be discussing many things based on college level music training, getting a degree is not necessary to do most of these things.

I would highly encourage any music student or indeed any musician to always be seeking out new ideas and new techniques or styles in music and constantly be exploring everything. Talk to everyone you play or work with, you never know where interesting new ideas will come from! I've enjoyed many discussions with friends who were themselves students with me at the time, or even not formally trained at all; and I've begun formally teaching and tutoring music myself in the past few months, and I've found it's true that teachers learn as much from their students as the students (hopefully) do from their teachers.

Music is a language (with many dialects), and like with any language, fluency is a useful thing to achieve to communicate effectively. Fluency is the ability to express yourself precisely the way you want to at any given point in time, and to create new expression rather than merely reciting other people's expression (in this context, writing or improvising your own music and not just playing existing music by other composers, though also like other languages, the ability to properly interpret other people's expression is also critical)¹, and it takes time and effort to achieve the best results. That is the goal with [capital-M] Music, and there is always room to improve. The journey is the point, and don't forget to have fun along the way!

Music is also neither just a way to make money nor mainly a cultural artifact, useful primarily for the purpose of challenging power structures or making a bold statement about society. Music is a deeply human and deeply emotional art form. While it can be used for other purposes (I know, I studied film scoring in school!), I can assure you that I did not have any of that in mind when I was a two-year-old dancing to music at a fair, or when I started my formal lessons at the age of three. We are moved by music at a deeper level than the intellectual level of certain kinds of utility music, and while music can be a powerful agent for change, it's partly because of its deeper power that it works so well in those capacities.² I am writing this a little over a year after the rise of OpenAI's ChatGPT took the world by storm, and many people have produced AI

¹ Phil Best's youtube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@PhilBestMusic>) has some of the most thorough discussion of these topics I've found, and he has a whole system for piano playing you can learn more about at playpianofluently.com.

² I've liked Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poem "Ode", available at the Poetry Foundation, Accessed January 19, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54933/ode->, ever since we played a musical setting by Edward Elgar ("The Music Makers Op. 69") at the orchestra now called Symphony of the Verdugos in 2018. Many people will be familiar with the opening couple of lines ('We are the music makers / And we are the dreamers of dreams'), but the whole poem is worth a read and speaks to music and art's power for change.

apocalypse scenarios where all art is computer generated and we just sit there blithely consuming it to enrich some corporation (and those are some of the rosier scenarios painted by some of these people!). I find some of these pieces far-fetched at best and not an immediate concern, though there may come a time (and possibly sooner than I hope) where some of these fears prove more well-founded than I would like them to be. But even if the AI apocalypse comes to pass, I will still find a way to make music, because as a Musician, it's simply part of who I am. I simply can't not make music, whoever might listen to it and for whatever purpose!

I also enjoy a deep social connection in music, and I find that playing music with other people is one of the most fun and stimulating things I do. In this world that tries relentlessly to tear us apart for partisan gain (politically and otherwise), I find that whatever our other differences may be, making music with other people draws us together in a way that little else can do - this might actually be one of its more subversive acts from a certain perspective! I think that if more of us made music together, the world would be a better place.

For more about me and my background and work, check out my website:

www.richardbrunermusic.com.

This is a living philosophy and has been developed through many years of lived experience and conversation, and I have no doubt that it will continue to evolve going forward. I look forward to revisiting it over time!

N.B. Throughout this paper, the word 'musician' will sometimes be capitalized and sometimes be lower-case. "[M]usician" will refer to a person who follows this "[capital-M] Music" philosophy, and "[m]usician" will be used when the idea applies (or should apply) more broadly to most or all musicians, whether or not they ascribe to this philosophy.

Acknowledgements

Many of the ideas I'm working with are based on things discussed in classes or taught to me by my professors at Berklee College of Music, where I earned my Bachelor of Music degree in Film Scoring in 2012. I'm also currently studying at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) for my Master of Music degree in Music Composition, and I've spent a lot of my own time in the years between developing some of these ideas on my own and combining them with ideas from numerous other people I've talked with or from whom I've read books / articles / Facebook posts, etc. or watched videos. I've cited / referenced a few things throughout, but I would need to cite more of it if I was going to use this in any formal academic sense. Some of it would be hard for me to cite today though because I've tossed these ideas around on my own so much I don't really know where I got all of them from anymore.

Just a few people I can think of for general credit who have influenced me and my ideas off the top of my head (in addition to my professors and friends at schools mentioned above):

Youtube videos particularly from Jacob Collier, Adam Neely, Rick Beato, Dr. Josh Wright, Dr. John Mortensen (Cedarville Music), Phil Best, Ryan Leach (who I've also interned for and worked with personally in the past) and many other people.

Film composer Ronen Landa and concert composer Barry Brisk, who have both been clients of mine for music preparation work in addition to having great discussions about music with them.

Facebook posts from the many random pages it shows me today, and specifically some short "essays" from guitarist / composer / teacher Richard Hannemann from Los Alamos, NM, who is a Facebook friend of mine. We've also recently had some correspondence, some of which is quoted below.

My composition teachers over the years: Seth Boustead of Accessible Contemporary Music in Chicago, Nathan Landes at New Trier High School, Gary Fry of High Touch Music (I did my film scoring senior project for high school with him), Joe Smith (film scoring) and Beth Denisch (composition) at Berklee, and Dr. Patrick O'Malley and Dr. Liviu Marinescu at CSUN.

Discussions with many of my orchestra conductors over the years (both in rehearsal and one on one), but particularly from Mary Rudzinski at Wilmette Jr. High School, Peter Rosheger at New Trier High School, Beth Pflueger and Dr. Paul Sherman at Glendale Community College in Glendale, CA, Arman Keyvanian of the Crown City Symphony, and Jim Domine of the San Fernando Valley Symphony Orchestra (I particularly like his ability to make one or two off-hand comments about a piece that transform my understanding even of pieces I thought I knew!); as well as Jan Tappan, Chris Peoples and Phil Cunneen of the Scottish Fiddlers of Los Angeles. Also big shout out to Rhea Davis, my first orchestra conductor at the Music Institute of Chicago who revealed to 8-year-old Richard what all the practicing had been for up to that point - that first rehearsal was a turning point in my life!

I've also gotten some ideas about musical philosophy from my banjo teacher Tom Collins of Banjo Quest on Patreon and Youtube (I've also studied with him in person through the Fiddle Hell camp in Boston and online). His ability to make an interesting hour long lesson out of three notes in a tune is uncanny! I've also gotten many ideas from Grey Larsen's book "The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle", which covers a lot more than tunes and techniques for those instruments in its 400+ pages!³

It would be impossible to name all the musicians I've learned from over the years, as I've learned something from every musician I've ever played with and most that I've listened to. But from a philosophical and life-direction perspective, I think special mention should go to Tania Opland & Mike Freeman, and the group Magical Strings. I discovered the concept of the "multi-instrumentalist" from Opland & Freeman's Masterharper of Pern CD with Anne McCaffrey, based on her Dragonriders of Pern series of novels. Around the same time (possibly in connection with them), I found the group Magical Strings, founded by Philip and Pam Boulding,

³ Grey Larsen, "The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle", Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2003.

which also encouraged me to go in the multi-instrumentalist direction. Both groups also got me interested in the hammered dulcimer, which I picked up around that time. This would have been in 8th grade and early high school, and there's a case to be made that I decided in part to pursue professional music because of those groups and the ripple effects they had on me. I actually made that case in the application essay I wrote for most of the colleges I applied to, though funnily enough, Berklee was the one for which I used a different essay - mostly because their essay question was too specific to use that topic.

My students, both the friends I've informally tutored over the years, and the students at CSUN I am formally tutoring in harmony and musicianship now, have helped me to sharpen my ideas on these topics. Particularly the section on Musicianship / Ear Training has been heavily shaped by my experience tutoring that class this past semester at CSUN, in addition to a lifetime of practice on my own terms.

And extra special thanks to my primary violin teacher growing up, Enid Cleary; and my first fiddle teacher and all around musical friend, Sarah Wilfong (arguably the single most influential violinist in my life!).

One final note here - I have been heavily influenced by ideas from the people listed above (and many more besides), but the totality of this philosophy is my own and inclusion on this list should not be taken as an endorsement on the part of anyone on it for any particular part of my philosophy, especially considering that some of my ideas were developed in reaction against something other people said!

With that, welcome to my world of Music!

There are four main concepts I think about for "[capital-M] Music":

- I. [Multi-Genreism](#)
- II. [Multi-Instrumentalism](#)
- III. [Multi-Rolism](#)
- IV. [Musicianship / Ear Training](#)

Multi-Genreism

Multi-Genreism is the most straight-forward of the concepts. It is the idea that any given instrument will be used in more than one genre of music, and learning something about some of

the others beyond the one you start with will help expand your musical horizons and knowledge. It's the easiest concept to work with because it uses something you presumably already have, your current instrument, to explore new areas without requiring you to buy or learn from scratch any additional instruments. You will have to learn at least slightly and possibly radically new ways of playing the instrument, and it is important initially to approach new genres on their own terms rather than trying too hard to force them into your existing ideas of music, realizing that what you already know will inevitably color your ideas about the new genre.

This is, for example, the difference between a classically trained violinist looking at a book of Irish fiddle tunes and scoffing at how easy they are because they don't look like the Tchaikovsky violin concerto on the one hand, and realizing that in Irish music usually only the bare bones of a tune is written and if you read it like it's classical, it will sound completely wrong to someone who is familiar with actual Irish fiddle playing (e.g. ornaments, differences in slur patterns [which are often not written at all in tunebooks], and subtleties of feel and groove compared to generally straighter classical playing). If you can approach the music on its own terms initially, you may find a wealth of magic that you didn't initially know was there, and it will expand your musical horizons.

The preferred methods for learning a new style may vary based on what style it is, but taking lessons from an experienced teacher or at least talking to actual musicians who already play the style well would be the most useful method, coupled with many hours of listening to music by people who are acknowledged to be proficient. You can take private lessons with a teacher, or find workshops, groups, or camps that focus on that genre (or that have classes at another kind of camp - many of the fiddle camps I'm aware of have classes in multiple styles of fiddle music, for example, and they often also have a few other instruments - guitar, banjo, flute/whistle, etc. as applicable). Groups like the Scottish Fiddlers of Los Angeles, of which I'm a member, are also great places to learn throughout the year. We do workshops from time to time, but we do a lot of teaching of fiddle techniques in our normal rehearsals as well, and cater to all levels and instruments once you have the basic mechanics of the instrument down. There are plenty of other groups like that for other styles and genres, especially if you live in or near a large city.

Books and videos can help as well, but it should be remembered that music is ultimately aural in nature and any written version will necessarily be a relatively crude rendering of the real music (even in classical music where notation is arguably quite sophisticated). This is why books often come with CDs (or these days online audio), and when they do, the recordings should be used extensively with the books.

Videos will not have that problem, but the issue with using instructional videos is that the instructor cannot give you personal feedback or tell you if you're doing it wrong even if you think you are doing it right (beware the video instructor who says "good job!" in their video!). Videos of performances might be more useful, as that's really just back to listening again (though make sure you are paying close attention to the sound and not just the visuals!). I've used plenty of

books and videos in my own studies, you just need to keep these things in mind when doing so.⁴

My Berklee professors really encouraged us to explore multiple genres - even the structure of the program helped with that. We had to take Harmony 1-4, which focused on jazz and pop harmony, and Tonal Harmony 1+2, which were focused on classical harmony, and I think all the majors had to do all of those. I was a film scoring major, so I had to do more classes but I think everyone did all of those classes. I also had to take 4 semesters of private instrumental lessons (violin in my case), and we worked on a different genre every semester. That wasn't explicitly required, but my teacher, Mimi Rabson, encouraged it. I studied Celtic fiddle, then classical, then another round of fiddle but this time with me writing variations on a tune for myself to play (I think it was based on Howard Shore's Lord of the Rings score), and then jazz fiddle for the last semester. We did do technical exercises throughout and I drilled on scales and arpeggios / chord progressions like everyone else (I think that's critical, and in all 12 keys both major and minor. The Circle of 5ths is your friend!).

I also played in a small band (combo) ensemble - violin and flute for the "horns", and 2 guitars, keyboard, bass and drums for my first semester, and then I played in the Berklee Contemporary Symphony Orchestra which had just started the previous year every semester after that. That group itself was unusual in that we played a lot of very different kinds of pieces every semester - classical (both limited standard repertoire and modern), pops, game / film soundtrack arrangements, and more. This is not likely to be the experience that most college violinists have today, but I think it was useful for me!

Multi-Instrumentalism

Multi-Instrumentalism is a similar concept, but for more than one instrument. They can be in the same genre or in different genres. True Multi-Instrumentalism requires exploring instruments that are not closely related - Violin / Viola doesn't really count, neither does Flute / Piccolo, Oboe / English Horn, etc. Violin / Mandolin would be a better start because the mandolin being a plucked instrument vs. the bowed violin, the way of thinking about music is more varied. Note that Violin / Viola (etc.) is great, and would be encouraged in the [capital-M] Music philosophy, it's merely not really multi-instrumentalism by itself.

⁴ You can find books that cover several styles in the same book. This is a common genre of fiddle book these days, but I tend not to like them very much. I find they tend to cover every style so shallowly that you might be more misled than helped by them. My favorite book of this type is Chris Haigh, "The Fiddle Handbook", London, UK, Backbeat Books, 2009. It covers each style in more depth than most similar books, and features a lot of artist names to listen to. That said, it seems to me that you are generally better off picking a style and diving deeply into it with material focused on that style, and then exploring others similarly, rather than trying to learn a tiny bit about a lot of styles all at once.

Everyone following this philosophy should eventually (ideally) learn at least one instrument in each of the main families [+piano/keyboard]. Main families are considered:

- Strings [ideally at least one bowed, and one plucked e.g. violin / guitar or mandolin]
- Woodwind [can include folk instruments like recorder, tin whistle, etc]
- Brass [the one I'm still missing]
- Percussion [hand percussion counts like Djembe, etc. - drumset is fine too]
- Singing [yes, even you!]
- Electronic [learn the fundamentals of musical sound synthesis - at least subtractive synthesis and ideally some other techniques too, such as FM, Additive, Physical Modelling, etc].

You can learn as many instruments from the same family as you want, but try to branch out to other main families as well, at least a little bit.

Obviously this may be a bit of a challenge as that's a lot of instruments, but you don't have to become a virtuoso on each of them. Berklee has the concept of your "principal instrument"⁵, which is the one you study at Berklee formally but also kind of implies that you might have other instruments you play as well. You should probably focus on one or two instruments, but be able to do at least the basics on some others and know the theory of many, particularly if you want to compose for multi-instrument ensembles like orchestra. This is an aspirational point, and the better you get at more instruments the more you'll benefit from this - there is no end to this, but you can work up to it over time (you'll notice I mention I still haven't managed to pick up a brass instrument).

I mention everyone should learn piano/keys, and this is because in addition to being a very important instrument in its own right for Western music, it is also a very useful instrument for learning music theory and composition techniques. This is due to its fully polyphonic nature (you can play any notes simultaneously that you can reach with your fingers / hands) and the wide range of the (piano) keyboard, as well as having all the notes laid out in a row in front of you, which allows you to see certain things visually in a way that you can't with a violin or a flute, or even a harp (since that's a primarily diatonic instrument with only 7 strings per octave). Also, some kind of keyboard is the centerpiece of many composition studios today, most often in conjunction with MIDI and computer notation software or digital audio workstations (DAWs) and synthesizers, so knowing how to play the keyboard is extremely useful.

Most of the music schools I'm familiar with at the college level require all students (certainly any writing majors) to take some version of Basic Keyboard Skills in the first few semesters. It's true at Berklee, it's true at CSUN, and it's true at Glendale Community College which I've also been involved with for several years here in Los Angeles (at least for the fully enrolled students seeking degrees, and they are available to anyone that wants to take them there). Even my high school Music Theory 1 class started with a couple of weeks of basic keyboard training, along with the fundamentals of standard music notation for any students that didn't already have that

⁵ "Principal Instruments", Berklee College of Music, Accessed Jan 11, 2024.
<https://college.berklee.edu/principal-instruments>

(we had some guitarists in that class that hadn't been doing school ensembles for several years like the rest of us had).

Also, note that you get benefit from any practice you do on additional instruments whether or not you play them publicly. The point is as much to do with expanding your awareness of what music is and can be as it is to do with "marketable job skills". I have my instruments divided into my Primary instruments, the ones I'd be comfortable selling my services on, and Other instruments, ones I play well enough for my own projects where I can control the nature of the writing (I simply won't write parts I can't play if I'm the one playing them), but maybe not well enough to be sure I could handle most of the music I'd be expected to play for someone else.⁶ Some instruments (particularly electric guitar and synths in my experience) also frequently require that you recognize what is meant and be able to reproduce on the fly, both technically and with specialized gear, if someone mentions "the [guitar] sound on [that song or artist]" in order to do much with studio work. There is not as much of that with instruments like acoustic violin or recorders. I can play certain instruments where I can't reliably do that, so they go on the Other list.

Multi-genreism and Multi-instrumentalism can feed off of each other. I found this to be the case in my own path, as I would learn another instrument in a particular genre I was studying (Irish music, classical music, etc), and then that new instrument was used in other genres, which I might then pick up, and then that might get me into more instruments, and so on.

Multi-Rolism

Multi-Rolism is the idea that a person shouldn't focus exclusively on one area (one role) of music making. The three areas I think about in this context are:

- Performance
- Composition
- Improvisation

A person should do at least a little of all of those (and performance should also include other people's music, not just your own if you are primarily a composer, and should be done in public at least a few times). Focusing on one area is fine, but everyone should try all three at some point.

I'm really glad that I studied (or am currently studying) writing-based majors in college (or maybe my philosophy has developed as it has because of that), because it seems to me that composers are more often also performers than performers are composers. I will probably have more to say on this topic at some point in the future, but for now I'll just note that even though CSUN doesn't require graduate composition majors to even audition on an instrument at all, let

⁶ If you want to see my list, it's available in its current version here:
<https://richardbrunermusic.com/about/#Instrument-List>

alone do anything with them at school, I believe all of the current graduate composers are playing in ensembles anyway, and I think we all play multiple instruments. I will also point out that every college-level music school I am familiar with also requires all undergraduate music students to study an instrument for at least 4 semesters regardless of major, so even if CSUN doesn't require an instrument for graduate composition majors, since it more or less requires an undergraduate music degree (or its equivalent), everyone will probably have learned an instrument in the past anyway at minimum.

There are reasons both for performers to learn music theory and composition and for composers to learn existing repertoire and to do performance. Learning music theory and composition techniques will allow performers to have a better understanding of how the music they are playing is put together, and will aid in memorization and more thoroughly knowing the piece. This can also help with confidence, both reducing the chance of a memory slip during performance and with the knowledge that recovering from such a slip will be easier if you have a more thorough understanding of the underlying music and not just a knowledge of which finger to use at any given point in time (muscle memory).⁷ I have found that memorizing a piece using multiple techniques, including music theory analysis, makes me much more comfortable in playing it, even if I use the sheet music later (something mentioned in Graham Fitch's book cited above), and I've even found that my ideal tempo increases once I've memorized a piece most of the time. Not just the tempo I can play the piece at, but actually the tempo I think the piece should be played at in an ideal performance.

Composers benefit from learning existing repertoire as a source of inspiration for their own music, and also to learn some tricks and techniques for solving certain musical problems that crop up frequently. There's no need to reinvent the wheel each time if an acceptable solution already exists, particularly in commercial applications where total originality is not as important as it can be in art music and deadlines are always too tight. If the composer wishes to explore new areas of music, this will also help ensure that they know what has already been tried before. Plus, playing for yourself and performing music for other people is just a lot of fun!

At this point, it might be useful to briefly discuss what I mean by music theory broadly. A full undergraduate college course in music theory (which will often be found both for performance majors and composition or other writing majors, though perhaps in slightly different ways) will cover several sub-categories. These may be either separate classes across several semesters (frequently your first 4 semesters) or sometimes more generally in one or two semesters as a broad overview, particularly for non-music-majors, or perhaps for majors like music business that focus less on making music. The typical areas covered will be harmony, form, counterpoint, and eventually instrumentation and orchestration.⁸ All of these categories actually exist in every

⁷ Graham Fitch has a nice set of ebooks on this topic, the most relevant here being *Practicing the Piano, Part 4: Practicing for Performance*, Informance, 2016, available at practicethepiano.com. See esp. pgs. 66-67, "The Analytic Memory". Note that this book (Part 4) in particular is largely instrument agnostic. Most of the other books in the set are more focused on piano specifically.

⁸ For a nice series of (free) essays / short books (PDFs) on all of these categories (mostly from an art music perspective), see Dr. Alan Belkin's essays on his website: <https://alanbelkinmusic.com/site/en/index.php/introduction/>, accessed January 15, 2024. He tries to cover

genre of music, but in most college courses they will focus on classical music (this is starting to shift somewhat, but the fact remains there are only so many instructional hours in a 4 year degree, many of which must be focused more specifically on your major, and some of which at least must be given to general education / liberal arts courses, so there's only so much room to play with to include more genres in an undergraduate degree environment). There are plenty of books on some of these things in other genres available. Also, along with all of these topics, an undergraduate music degree generally includes a series of ear training / musicianship classes which complement these classes, but [see below](#) for more on that. Rounding out the general music classes would be a couple of semesters of music history (or music appreciation for non-majors), and frequently one or two semesters of conducting, though that may vary by major and school. We had all of that as film scoring majors at Berklee. I will also be discussing some of these topics in more detail in a forthcoming paper about my philosophy of music (as opposed to music-making in this one).

I think of improvisation as combining the other two areas - it's [real-time] composition as performance, and yet it's distinct from both of them as well. Guitarist and composer Richard Hanneman also makes a distinction between improvisation and noodling, writing in an email to me:

Improv[isation] is the creation on the fly of variations on a theme -- the theme already established and usually a full song (think variations on Twinkle (mine or Mozart's for that matter) or variations on Duke of Marlboro which damn near everyone did at one time or another). Noodling is composing on the fly -- in other words making it all up whole cloth beginning with a single note which may or may not become a head motif either melodic or rhythmic or both.⁹

Noodling is usually done solo. I think of a related type of improvisation I call "free-improv", which can be done either solo or in a small group format.¹⁰ You can also try a form of improvisation with a large ensemble like an orchestra (the composer will provide some instructions that the players will execute on their own initiative, rather than playing pre-determined parts), but I've only rarely found that to be useful for more than generating sound-effects or horror score textures!¹¹ Both improvisation and noodling / free-improv are useful, as long as you know what you are trying to do at any given point in time. I often use free-improv or noodling as a springboard to get ideas for composition, which can then be developed with craft / music theory techniques into a full piece of composed music (or if you get strong enough at improv, you can

things from a first principles perspective, so that it applies to most styles of (classical) music. Also, his book *Music Composition: Craft and Art*, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2018, is one of the single best books about composition (as opposed to music theory) I've ever read.

⁹ Richard Hannemann, email to author, January 14, 2024.

¹⁰ I took a class with cello teacher Eugene Friesen in my first semester at Berklee called String Improv Lab, where we did free-improv based on cross rhythms (incidentally a great way to learn that too), mostly in groups of 3 players.

¹¹ One of the relatively few pieces of this type I have liked, and that seemed to result in something at least a cut above horror textures, was Terry Riley's piece *In C*, New York, Associated Music Publishers, 1964. We played this piece at the Symphony of the Verdugos recently.

record the improvisation itself and that can be a finished piece / recording, possibly with some post-processing).¹²

Another useful thing with improvisation is the ability to simply play an instrument, without needing additional guidance. I saw a video one time from Alfred Music where Dr. Stewart Gordon was talking about a kind of improvisation and he mentioned that he'd seen graduate students in piano performance who could play advanced Beethoven sonatas very well but couldn't play simple folk songs they'd known since childhood by ear, or even know what to do if someone simply said "play me 'C major'"!¹³ This over-reliance on sheet music and on someone else (a "composer") telling you what to do is problematic, and it should be possible for a Musician to at least play something on their instruments without reliance on a sheet music source (even if they then memorize it).¹⁴

In addition to just thinking about performance vs. composition, within performance I think it's important to try both solo performance and ensemble performance (both small chamber / combo ensembles and large ensembles like orchestra, wind ensemble or big band). All of these things are quite different experiences, and doing them all will help to expose you to more of what it means to be a Musician. In classical music training it's pretty much a requirement to do all of that at some point - I did student solo recitals at least once per year for violin growing up, and I've done a lot of playing in string quartets / trios on both violin and viola (and there are a lot of other types of chamber ensembles), and I've done both string and symphony orchestra for much of my life - between them, I've done at least one public orchestra concert every year (in a row) for 27 of the 33 years I've been alive to date, and I played in 20 orchestra concerts last year alone! (2023) Certain genres may not have all of those categories automatically, though I've done them all even with my fiddle music - solo playing or with an accompanist like piano, guitar, etc, small group in many jam sessions with the Scottish Fiddlers of Los Angeles or other groups, and then the big shows we do with the SFLA can have 40 or more people playing in a large group context and featuring fully arranged music with multiple parts.

I will say that I don't tend to get nervous for myself anymore when playing violin or viola (or fiddle) in orchestra concerts, or the nervousness I get actually mostly feels good - it feels like a bit of a high and a sharpening of focus. As an example, we're working on Shostakovitch's 5th symphony right now at the San Fernando Valley Symphony, and the violas have a super-exposed section soli that goes almost as high as possible on the instrument. I was a little nervous for that section at rehearsal the other day but that just enhanced my concentration and we nailed it, which felt amazing! You can tell we've all been practicing that part. When the audience is present that only enhances all of that, and it can feel quite spectacular, especially when all goes well! In contrast, I recently gave my first public solo piano recital in over 20 years

¹² For an outstanding example of this, see pretty much anything by Dr. Noam Sivan, but particularly his album *Ambiro's Journey*, Self-released, 2017. 70 minutes of uninterrupted solo classical piano improv recorded in one take.

¹³ Dr. Stewart Gordon, *Memorization in Piano Performance*, Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music, 2004, DVD / online video.

¹⁴ Also see Phil Best's website playpianofluently.com for a lot more about this topic as it applies to piano playing in particular.

and that was much more nerve-wracking than even difficult orchestral music has recently been for me! (It went very well, but solo performance can feel quite a bit different than ensemble performance).

As for composition, writing for various types of ensembles and then having your music played by other musicians (with or without you playing too) is a highly gratifying experience. Every time I have a chance to get my music performed (even in a reading session, let alone a concert), I am reminded why I keep doing this and it makes all the hours spent toiling away on the writing and prep work more than worth it! There are not a lot of other things you can do in life that feel as good as having “60 of your closest friends” play a piece that a few months ago was just inside your head and help you bring it into the world for real. I hope that feeling never goes away, and I’ve been told by more experienced composers that it doesn’t!

Musicianship

Another important element of being a well-rounded musician is ear-training. At many colleges and universities, the ear-training class (usually several semesters’ worth of classes) is actually called “musicianship”, though Hannemann points out that you can call most of music education “musicianship”.¹⁵ At Berklee we called it Ear Training (and I would count my string sight-reading lab and string improv lab in my first semester as part of a “musicianship suite”); at CSUN the class is called Musicianship, and I’m tutoring it for the younger undergraduate students, along with harmony classes.

The ability to hear music and to know what you are hearing is obviously very useful for musicians of any sort. This goes along with music theory and allows you to hear many of the things that you will learn to see and talk about in harmony classes, or to make better sense of how music has evolved over time if you study any version of music history (this is true for any genre, not just the classical music history most often taught in college environments). The more you are able to recognize what you are hearing as you hear it, the easier it will be to learn new music, and to figure out how to write down or play music you might hear in your head as you compose or improvise.

Most music is made of patterns of sound in time of one sort or another (that might even be something of a basic definition of music, but we’ll save that discussion for another day!), and being able to recognize and work with the patterns rather than the individual sounds (or notes) will be a big help in becoming a fluent musician. Arguably it is a necessity to be considered a fluent musician. Think about reading words - once you learn to read, you don’t read individual letters, but whole words all at once.¹⁶ This is one of many reasons why instrumental musicians spend (or should spend) so much time practicing scales and arpeggios on their instruments, and why music theory is so useful for performers as well as composers. This concept is also

¹⁵ Hannemann, email to author, January 14, 2024.

¹⁶ Trying to remember who I got this point from. I know I saw it somewhere in the past couple of years, but I’ll update this footnote when I find it again.

one of the most useful ways of developing a strong ability as a sight-reader as well as ear training. One student in my Sight-Reading Lab at Berklee quipped one day that “If I see a scale, I should play a scale”, and this simple-sounding idea opened a whole new window for me into sight-reading technique. This concept will be developed much more in my philosophy of music paper.

As a class or as a formal study, many people do not really get instruction in ear training until they get to music school in college. It would be much more beneficial to start ear training of some sort at a much younger age.¹⁷ I started with Suzuki violin when I was three years old, and the first couple of years of that were done by ear rather than with sheet music, which I think has been extremely helpful for me (though you don’t need to start it quite that young!).¹⁸ I also did some musicianship classes through outside music programs I participated in while I was in grade school, mostly through the Music Institute of Chicago; and then we got it through our high school music theory classes, which we were lucky enough to have at New Trier High School. By the time I got to Berklee I was already very good at ear training (enough to test into Ear Training 4 my first semester), and this has also served me well in my musical career to date since then as well.

There are several types of ear training, each of which is useful both as a general musical skill and also potentially as a “marketable job skill” in certain contexts. In college classes, they will most often focus on a combination of sight-singing and dictation.

Sight-singing is where you read a passage of music and sing it, often with some form of solfege - do, re, mi etc. They will eventually get some form of hand or arm motion involved while singing (at Berklee, we used standard conducting patterns for the time signature we were in). All of this develops both your sight-reading ability, and your mental connection between notation and resulting musical sound among other things. Solfege (or a similar system) also helps to relate notes to each other and helps with pattern recognition in music, particularly with the movable do system we use in most American schools (where “do” is always the tonic note or the ‘1’ note regardless of what key you are in, vs. fixed do where “do” is always C. That system has its own benefits, particularly when you get outside of tonal or modal contexts, and there is no ‘1’ note anymore).¹⁹

¹⁷ This is hardly to say that you can’t start music at an older age, but if you don’t really do anything with music until you are an adult, it will be a different experience than it would have been if you had started it earlier. But it can be a highly gratifying part of life at any age.

¹⁸ The Suzuki program basically requires that it be done starting at a young age and by ear from the beginning. Many of the critiques I’ve seen of the program strike me as a misunderstanding of how the method works, and mistake using the Suzuki repertoire books for doing the Suzuki method. If you start much after the age of 6 or 7 it would be difficult to follow the method as intended, and earlier would be better, as it is based on the developmental period where a child is acquiring their first language, and is somewhat based on language acquisition techniques themselves. See internationalsuzuki.org/method (accessed January 17, 2024), for a brief summary of the actual Suzuki method.

¹⁹ Dr. Liviu Marinescu had a lot to say about the benefits of fixed do solfege, which he was trained in, during our Teaching Music in Higher Education class at CSUN in the Fall 2023 semester.

Another system not taught that often these days is called Sacred Harp (named for a famous book of hymns used in this method), which uses shape notes in the sheet music and an altered form of solfege called fasola. It was very common in America in the 19th century (particularly in the South), before German methods supplanted it and morphed into our modern music education system today, and Sacred Harp (or related methods) can still be found in some places today. I got to try it at Fiddle Hell when I went to that camp one year, and one of my Berklee classes covered it a little bit from an ethnomusicological perspective.²⁰

Sometimes people complain about singing in this context, and will point out that they are not singers. Nonetheless, singing is useful in this context because it will help to build up kinesthetic awareness of real-time intonation in your body as well as through the ear / brain. Some instruments particularly abstract away some of this, such as keyboard or even fretted string instruments like guitar.²¹ The player cannot markedly alter the pitch of these instruments on the fly for intonation purposes (you can bend strings on the guitar but that's less likely to be used to adjust intonation than for expressive effect, and you can only raise the pitch, not lower it), and so players do not inherently build the same awareness of real-time intonation that you get automatically with fretless string instruments (with continuous pitch control so that you have to place your finger at exactly the right spot on the fingerboard), and to a large degree with the woodwind and brass instruments (which have holes or keys, or valves / harmonics to help with intonation, but then you can bend the pitch up and down with your embouchure somewhat to fine tune the pitch, so that you still need to listen very carefully and make adjustments on the fly).²² Having to do this forces you to listen to what you are doing and really hones your ear well in general.

Singing is the ultimate “instrument” for this purpose however, as all of it happens inside your body and you have to use your inner hearing to set your “voice muscles” correctly and then use feedback from your ears to adjust them as necessary. This is a way of really embodying music as a physical and human thing, and will really improve every aspect of making music even when you switch back to playing your other instruments. Even for players of instruments that do more with pitch adjustment, singing is more useful for these exercises, though all musicians should always be listening to their sound on their instruments and making any possible and necessary adjustments anyway, and these techniques will be applicable to many instruments as well as to singing. On a related note, learning to map your instrument to music (physically) similarly will also really improve your instrumental playing, and these two things together will help make your

²⁰ For a good overview of Sacred Harp as a history and practice, see Kiri Miller, *Travelling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007. This is the book we used in my class at Berklee.

²¹ It may not be a complete coincidence that every musicianship student I tutored in my first semester at CSUN was either primarily a pianist or a guitarist. These instruments have many other strengths of course! By the way, I should also mention that the piano is extensively used in ear training classes, it merely doesn't give you certain benefits that you get with some other instruments in this regard if it is your primary (and particularly your only) instrument.

²² Dr. Gordon goes into some detail about these issues with the piano in the “Aural Memory” chapter in the *Memorization for Piano Performance* video referenced earlier.

instrument an extension of your “musical body” which will improve both your general performance and particularly your improvisation skills.²³

Dictation goes the other way: they will play a melody on a piano (or some other instrument) and you will have to write it down in notation. At first they will probably tell you what key it is in and what the starting pitch and time signature are, but eventually they may strip that away and leave you with just the pitches themselves (and possibly an unrelated reference pitch they will tell you, to help develop relative pitch abilities²⁴ - this is like perfect pitch but can be learned over time, and if you can internalize your own reference pitch then it can function like perfect pitch in many ways. All those years of hearing the violin / orchestra tuning ‘A’ have given me a pretty solid internal reference pitch, and a neat party trick - play me any note on an instrument, and I’ll tell you what it was without looking! I guess that says something about the kind of parties I went to...).

Dictation is used in the “real world” too, but there it is called transcription, and I’ve made money from doing transcription work for artists where they give me audio demos and I make lead sheet music (or sometimes even more than that) for them. If you’ve ever seen a book of solos transcribed from records of famous jazz artists (for example), that’s ear training in action! This is also often used as a teaching technique, particularly in genres involving soloing. They will have the student listen to and transcribe solos from well-known players to help develop the student’s own soloing abilities.

Other areas they will probably work on in a high school or college ear training class will be melodic and harmonic interval recognition (minor thirds, major sevenths, etc), which will lead to chord recognition (major vs. minor triads, dominant (and other) seventh chords, even with upper structure tensions like 9ths and 13ths, especially in a jazz context like we had in part at Berklee) and eventually on to full chord progressions. Certain programs may include other components as well.

Both dictation and sight-singing will develop your rhythm skills as well as pitch skills, and one should note that in pretty much all music (certainly all music I’m familiar with), rhythm is a more important component than pitch. Getting both components right would be ideal, but if you have to sacrifice one (when sight-reading complicated music, for example), sacrifice the pitch and get the rhythm right; though it should be noted that in ear training sight-singing contexts in particular, you want to focus on getting both right and really be picky about singing in tune. Start slowly, or take away rhythm entirely and sing each pitch in free time initially, rather than distorting the rhythm. In sight-reading / ensemble contexts, though, I’ve frequently seen quotes along the lines of “The right note at the wrong time is still the wrong note”! Solid rhythm with pitches that are questionable will generally be less objectionable than someone breaking the

²³ Another aspect explored in much more detail by Phil Best in his system available at playpianofluently.com, though note that this idea applies equally to every instrument.

²⁴ This technique was suggested by my professor for my Teaching Music in Higher Education class at CSUN, Dr. Liviu Marinescu.

rhythm of the piece to hit every pitch correctly, especially in an ensemble context where that is basically fatal (one reason it's important to try ensemble playing!).

When doing dictation, I generally separate the two components and work on figuring out the rhythm first, and then figure out the pitches on later passes since they will usually play an example several times. At this point in my musical career, particularly for class exercises I'm often able to get both components more or less simultaneously. Hearing patterns rather than notes helps with this a lot, which mostly takes time and experience; but when I was learning how to do this, I would do it that way (and that's how I've been working with my students recently), and if I get confused today, that is still how I think about it. I do find that I usually get the rhythm in full before I get the pitches in full even today when doing many of these exercises.

I would also recommend that when doing dictation particularly as an ear training exercise, that it be done with pencil and manuscript paper (or at least a stylus on an iPad - in other words, with handwriting), and not on a computer screen with a mouse. It's one of the few times that I really think handwritten notation is inherently superior to computer notation. I think it is entirely possible to write "real" music on a computer, though I have heard people argue otherwise before.²⁵ However, in this instance, I think that handwriting is superior, partly for similar reasons to why singing is the best way to do sight-singing ear training (the name notwithstanding!), namely that you get kinesthetic benefits to feeling your body write differently depending on what the notes are.

I've watched my Musicianship students this past semester using Auralia (ear training dictation software) on the computer screen for their homework, and it seems to me that clicking on quarter note symbols and clicking on eighth note symbols doesn't give you the same tactile and visceral experience of these things that writing them with a pencil on paper does. Clicking the mouse *feels* the same even if the resulting notes don't *look* the same. This is even true where you can use a computer keyboard to type different note values, like in Sibelius or Dorico (notation software) - pushing the 2 key and pushing the 3 key basically feel the same in a way that writing note values on paper does not. Music may be primarily aural, but music-making is a multi-sensory experience, and the more you can get all of your senses (at least hearing, vision and touch) involved the faster and more thoroughly you will learn it. This seems like a subtle point, but I think it's nonetheless important. A lot of musical training is pretty subtle, especially when trying to go from merely good to excellent or even professional proficiency!²⁶ This doesn't make it less significant, if anything it makes it more significant. I'm not opposed to using Auralia (or similar software) as a source for dictation exercises, but I think this next semester I'm really going to encourage my students to write it by hand first and only put it in the computer when they think they have it.

²⁵ My Arranging 2 professor at Berklee, Mirek Kocandrle, was one such person. Somewhat relatedly, that was the one class I dropped since it wasn't required for my degree...

²⁶ When I was first learning audio production and doing audio ear-training, I used to joke that you should make dramatic changes so you can hear what's happening (to EQ for example), then back it off until you can no longer hear a difference when you test the bypass. If you can, it's too much! If you want to try audio ear training, check out F. Alton Everest, *Critical Listening Skills for Audio Engineers*, Boston, MA: Course Technology Cengage Learning, 2007.

Also, a Musician should be able to write by hand when the need arises, so practicing handwritten notation isn't a bad idea anyway. You don't want to be tethered to a computer to such a degree that you can't operate without it (obviously if everything you do revolves around electronic computer music that'll be a problem anyway, though see the [Multi-Instrumentalism](#) section for why that shouldn't be the exclusive way you work!) The computer is very helpful when used appropriately - I certainly wouldn't want to give up my computer composition / production studio, but it should not be mandatory for existing as a Musician. I can still make music when the power goes out!

Another way to think about this, which applies to the whole philosophy, is that you should be using your tools rather than the tools using you. This is one reason to learn multiple distinct instruments, so that you don't get locked into one way of perceiving how music might work because that's how your instrument works, or that you get too locked into writing music one way because that's how your DAW or notation software works. You want to get to the point where you can let the music lead where you go, rather than the technology leading where you go, and then you make the technology work towards that goal. Sometimes handwriting is the best way of going about doing that!

I remember a music preparation project working on orchestral improvisation textures for a recording session (so the composer could get some unique horror score samples for his future projects). He sent me a photo of a handwritten sheet of paper showing what he wanted for the textures, and it took so long and was so complicated to enter into the computer that I found myself wondering if it wouldn't have been better just to give the players the handwritten sheet, which was perfectly readable if a little messy. It wasn't necessarily a whole lot easier to read the printed version anyway, and it took me over 8 hours to put that sheet in the computer! We were working in Sibelius at the time, and I thought I knew how to use it, but I had to look up something online for every single one of the textures...

As another example of not letting technology (in this case, instruments) get in the way, when working on music on an instrument, teachers will often recommend singing a line out loud to make sure you know musically how it should go (both for pitch / rhythm, and particularly for expression), then figuring out how to make the instrument do that, rather than getting too concerned over technical difficulties like fingering or string crossing patterns at the lowest level. It's a bit like the expression "missing the forest for the trees".

I also like doing Musicianship tutoring in particular in person rather than on Zoom or otherwise online, because it helps me as the tutor to be able to watch the students physically do the exercises in a way that is harder if they are on a video call with me instead (particularly for sight singing, though it was helpful even for dictation practice). Embodying the music, remember. Harmony tutoring works pretty well both ways as long as we can somehow share a piano / keyboard.

While this paper is not so much a practical how-to guide, here are a couple of less conventional exercises I like a lot that have helped develop my own ear training, which you may or may not encounter in a class depending on the teacher (probably not in this exact form):

Ex. 1 - Drone singing (or playing): Go find some drone recordings²⁷ and sing or play anything along with them, trying to stay in tune with the drone. You can use solfege or hum / sing a single syllable as you wish. Maybe start with a scale (with the drone being the first note, though you can then change it to being some other scale degree). I would even try the scale slowly, really listening for the sound the different degrees make against the drone. When I do this with singing, I physically feel something in my head that varies by scale degree (especially when singing an open mouth syllable like “ah”). This will help you get oriented, and then try some simple folk song tunes and eventually improvise against it! This is also a good way to check your intonation while playing or singing in general. I’ve even found myself humming along with the various 60 hz appliances in my house, such as my AC unit or my fridge, or lawn mowers outside!

Ex. 2 - Making up duets: Particularly when I came out to Los Angeles and started spending a lot more time in my car, I found myself singing along with songs on my phone and making up duet parts (or trio parts, etc) to go with the songs I knew or learned. Note that the duet parts you make may or may not be good as actual harmony parts to use in real arrangements (often less is better on an actual recording - just for the chorus, for example, while this exercise will often have you singing harmony the whole time). This one requires a little more experience than drone singing does, as it works best once you have some idea of what you are doing with music theory in addition to just hearing things, but my ear training improved after I started doing this, and if you sing along with instrumental breaks (or hum wordless background lines with the vocals), you can even experiment with counterpoint against the soloist!

You can also learn how to play back on your instrument what you hear from someone else without ever writing anything down, and in many traditional styles of music (e.g. celtic fiddle / folk music), the tunes have been taught orally, as it’s called, for far longer than they’ve been passed on from sheet music. I find today that I learn and memorize tunes much more securely when I’ve learned them by ear than when I’ve learned them from books or other sheet music sources. There are methods for teaching tunes by ear - the teacher playing slowly and building up the tune bit by bit with lots of repetition,²⁸ but you can also do it at speed at a jam session or with a recording, it’s just more difficult. If you do try it at speed, you’ll probably find that you grab bits and pieces initially - note which bits those are, as they are often distinctive parts of the tune you can use to recognize the tune later. When doing this type of ear training, especially when trying to learn new styles of music, pay close attention not only to when notes start and what

²⁷ Just google search (or youtube search) “Drone Key of ___ [fill in whichever note you want the drone to use]. Here’s an example just by doing that: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MimVnBAuYqA> [key of C]. There are lots to choose from, and Spotify and Apple Music have even more, or you can even make your own without too much trouble.

²⁸ I really like Baron Collins-Hill’s mandolin videos at mandolelessons.com for this - in the tune teaching videos, he goes at exactly the right pace for me, such that by the end of the video I’ve learned the tune thoroughly but it didn’t feel too slow (or too long).

order they are in, but also how notes evolve over time (do they grow in volume? Stay the same? Fade out? How is vibrato used if that's an element of your instrument?), and how they end / transition to the next note. This may be different than you are used to in new styles.

Another version of ear training I've used in the "real world" is the ability to recognize instruments and styles of music from recordings. I've worked in operations at production music library companies as my "day job" for most of my post-college career to date, and done a decent amount of work describing tracks with metadata so clients could search the database and find tracks they wanted (or we could find them based on briefs clients sent us). Two of the main things we had to do were to identify the various instruments involved in the track, and what the genre was, in addition to assigning mood keywords for the music and a written description mentioning all those things plus listing any solos and a brief description of the lyrical content if the song had words. All of that just from listening to the track a couple of times.

My first week at Berklee, they had an alum come in and talk to us during our orientation and he said that the class he relied on the most in his everyday work as a musician was ear training.

Conclusion

There are lots of other skills and techniques that would be useful for musicians to know for a long term career in music. Knowing about different aspects of recording music is useful, whether you are recording yourself or playing on or running other people's recording sessions. Playing to a click track or overdubbing / multi-tracking music is a skill in and of itself - I've seen musicians who were quite good at live music fall down completely when trying to record in a studio situation! Mixing and even mastering recordings are also separate skills unto themselves.

Building and maintaining a professional level music production / composition studio is another area that can take many years (and potentially quite a bit of money) to get right, though you can start with a fairly modest studio at the beginning. Even just an iPad by itself can be a place to start these days (if you don't need it to be computer-based, then even manuscript paper and a pencil could be enough at first!). The more knowledge you have, the more versatile you will be, and even if you choose to hire people later, you will have a better sense of what they are doing and if they are doing it right.

All of these elements put together will make you a well-rounded musician with the ability to actually make (M)usic and not just to play something that you carefully learned from sheet music by someone else on one instrument (though of course that is also part of being a Musician!). These are skills and concepts that will set you up for a lifetime of music making and maybe even a lifelong career, as well as enhancing your appreciation (and even reverence) for this amazing and beautiful thing that we call Music!

P.S. One other thought I'll leave you with here - music is very important to the world and to society as a whole. It might seem obvious or trite to say this, but it's easy to lose sight of that in

the messiness of everyday life and when the news of the wider world gets bad (which happens all too often - there's always something happening somewhere...). I've been trying to live by these principles for at least the last several years, and I had started to build up a bit of a life in music when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in 2020. Every live music event that I had been planning to participate in was canceled over the course of two days in March 2020, and we didn't get to do anything in that regard again for about a year and a half (with the exception of a few Zoom meetings and group video recordings with a couple of my ensembles that really didn't replace that at all, even while they were sometimes interesting themselves). My mental health took a beating during the 15-month lockdown period in California (and I don't really know anyone who took it well), and while I've recovered most of it since then, it has had a major impact on me. Living through the experience of having live music forcibly taken away from me by government decree (for good reason with a major public health crisis, but still), reminded me forcefully how important it is to me as a Musician, both practically and spiritually, for lack of a better word; and seeing other people's reactions reminded me how much it means to all of us - even to people who don't play music themselves, but who are part of our audience. This is one of several reasons why I've gone back to school recently - I want to do my part to inspire future generations through teaching music, and teaching Music, and I really believe that in doing so I and we can make the world a better place.